

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 459 612

FL 026 996

AUTHOR Cohen, Andrew D.; Fass, Lydia
TITLE Oral Language Instruction: Teacher and Learner Beliefs and the Reality in EFL Classes at a Colombian University.
PUB DATE 2001-02-00
NOTE 40p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Action Research; Classroom Research; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Higher Education; Interviews; *Oral Language; Participant Observation; Questionnaires; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; *Student Attitudes; Student Evaluation; Tables (Data); *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Researchers; *Teacher Student Relationship; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS Colombia

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of the work of nine teacher researchers who took an in-depth look at instructional practices and beliefs about oral language and its assessment. There are three sets of research questions: (1) How do teachers and students believe oral instruction should be handled in the classroom and to what extent do the beliefs that teachers have about students' oral production in the classroom and the students' own beliefs match the reality? (2) How are teachers using the required materials for oral language production? and (3) How do teachers assess students orally? Forty teachers and 63 students at all levels of a Colombian university's adult English program participated in this study. It was found that both teachers and students generally believed successful oral production was based on accuracy. Teachers' believed instruction was more student-centered, which was inconsistent with their actual classroom practice. Consistent with student beliefs, student evaluation was in fact accuracy-based. The pedagogical implications included a need for: (1) guidance both to teachers and students in how to make EFL teaching and learning more truly communicative in nature; and (2) more teacher training in how to conduct language assessment in the classroom. Appendices include: "Beliefs/Materials Questionnaire"; "Assessment Questionnaire"; "Beliefs/Materials Follow-Up Questionnaire"; "Assessment Follow-Up Questionnaire"; "Materials Group Interview"; and "Observation Tool." (Contains 17 references.) (KFT)

Oral Language Instruction: Teacher and Learner
Beliefs and the Reality in EFL Classes at a Colombian University¹

Andrew D. Cohen

&

Lydia Fass

Department of English as a Second Language
University of Minnesota

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

- ☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it
- ☐ Minor changes have been made to
improve reproduction quality

- Points of view or opinions stated in this
document do not necessarily represent
official OERI position or policy

February 2001

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND
DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS
BEEN GRANTED BY

Andrew Cohen

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

1

¹ We would like to thank Dr. Anne Lazaraton for the invaluable feedback that she provided us on the full report for this study.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ABSTRACT

Given the myriad of reasons why EFL students may not develop speaking skills, there has emerged a clear need for research on beliefs and practices regarding the teaching, learning, and assessment of speaking. In the spirit of action research, nine Colombian teacher-researchers took a bottom-up, in depth look at instructional practices and beliefs about oral language and its assessment. Their research questions were:

1. How do teachers and students believe oral instruction should be handled in the classroom? To what extent do the beliefs that teachers have about students' oral production in the classroom and the students' own beliefs match the reality?
2. How are teachers using the required materials for oral language production?
3. How do teachers assess students orally?

Forty teachers and 63 students in beginning, intermediate, and advanced courses at a private Colombian university's adult English program participated in the study. Instrumentation included questionnaires, follow-up questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observation.

The teacher-researchers found both teachers and students generally believed successful oral production was based on accuracy. While both teacher and student beliefs about the appropriate ratio of teacher talk to student talk reflected a teacher-centered classroom, teachers' beliefs somewhat more of a student-centered approach – inconsistent with their actual classroom practice. In addition, while the frequency and manner of teacher feedback varied, characteristics of oral language considered when assessing students orally were accuracy-based, rather than reflecting a communicative approach.

The pedagogical implications included a need for (1) guidance both to teachers and students in how to make EFL teaching and learning truly communicative in nature, and (2) more teacher training in how to conduct language assessment in the classroom.

Introduction

The teaching and assessment of oral language in the university-level English as a foreign language classroom in some parts of the world continues to be a challenging endeavor. Teachers are frequently not fluent in English and therefore not confident in their use of the language. The EFL students do not necessarily speak very much English in class, nor do they have much opportunity to practice using the language outside of the classroom. Classes may be large, the curriculum may favor the written language, and the focus may be on grammar rather than on oral communication. Hence, the speaking skills among these EFL students may not be well exercised and consequently underdeveloped.

Commensurate with a lack of emphasis on speaking instruction, there may be a reluctance on the part of teachers to assess oral language in the classroom. Aside from the issues of time and logistics, a plausible explanation is that the EFL teacher does not receive adequate training or exposure to how to assess oral language performance so as to feel comfortable doing it. Along with a possible lack on the part of teachers to promote speaking in the classroom and a sense of inability on the part of EFL students to speak English adequately, there may also be a set of beliefs on the part of both students and teachers supporting a more traditional approach to language instruction – that a reasonable way to proceed is to focus on the other modalities (that is, grammar, reading, and writing) rather than on oral communication. A logical explanation for this would be the special demands that oral communication puts both on the nonnative English-speaking teachers who must serve as a model of English fluency and on the

students as well, who are called upon to perform orally in front of their peers and possibly lose face as a result.

A Brief Review of Literature

The current popularity of communicative approaches to ESL and EFL instruction in many parts of the world has prompted teachers to look for varied means of assessing their students' oral abilities in the classroom (see Brown, 2001, Ch. 3).² With this shift in the focus of oral language assessment from more traditional interviews with pat questions to more communicative, performance-oriented measures (see, for example, Brown, 1998, and Norris, Brown, Hudson, & Yoshioka, 1998), perhaps there will be an increased trend in foreign-language teacher training programs around the world towards these more performance-oriented measures. As these measures are more flexible and offer more possibilities for how to evaluate oral performance, teachers may feel they are more accessible and may be more comfortable with them.

Much of the research on teacher and student beliefs in foreign language classrooms has so far relied primarily on Horwitz's "Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory" (BALLI) (1983, 1987), which includes 34 broadly-tuned items, including items relating to various aspects of speaking, such as beliefs about the ease of learning to speak, the importance of pronunciation, committing errors in speaking, and the role of practice. Studies using the BALLI, have, for instance, compared the beliefs of Russian learners of English to those of American learners of French and Spanish (Tumposky,

² Brown offers six interconnected characteristics as a description of communicative language teaching – focusing on all components, engaging learners in use of language for meaningful purposes, striking a proper balance between fluency and accuracy, teaching for out-of-class communication, focus on the

1991). Interestingly, in that study, the 54 Russian students were more likely to hold the belief that it was important to take risks and to practice speaking the language, while the 36 Americans were holding themselves back from practicing the speaking skill, although they were motivated to achieve fluency. These American students believed that the learning of the target language was not viewed by their compatriots as an important or valued achievement, nor would it necessarily lead to better employment opportunities. It should also be pointed out that the Russian students were a select group of undergraduates who were in the U.S. on an orientation program before being placed as exchange students in American colleges, so they had already committed themselves to risk taking and were in an ESL, not an EFL, situation.

A more recent study by Kern (1995) demonstrated how the BALLI can be used to compare teacher and student beliefs and to tease out differences that may exist. In a study of the beliefs of 288 first and second semester college French students and their instructors, it was found that in certain domains teachers' beliefs bore little, if any, relationship to students' beliefs. For example, students' and instructors' opinions on pronunciation, error correction, and the importance of rule learning contrasted more at the end of the semester than at the beginning. Kern highlights the importance not only of the nature of the textbook but also of the test materials. As he puts it, "In the final analysis it is not what we say that is important or unimportant, but rather what we assess, and how we assess it, that will send a clear message to our students about what instructed language learning is all about" (Kern, 1995: 81).

The Need for this Study

Given the myriad of reasons why EFL students may not develop speaking skills and why the assessment of these abilities may be limited, there has emerged a clear need for research on beliefs and practices regarding the teaching, learning, and assessment of speaking. In addition, since the issues are so deeply embedded in classroom practices, it would seem imperative to engage classroom teachers in the research effort. Hence, a plan for study would entail both quantitative and qualitative forms of action research by teachers, including the design of interview schedules and questionnaires, and the collection of data (Hopkins, 1993; Seliger and Shohamy, 1989; Freeman, 1998; Wallace, 1998; Burns, 1999). Wallace defines *action research* as "systematically collecting data on your everyday practice and analyzing it in order to come to some decisions about what your practice should be" (1998: 4). Wallace also underscores the benefits of **collaborative** action research -- that is, working in subgroups of teacher colleagues.

The study reported on in this article reflects a research project involving issues that were raised by teachers at the grass-roots level. It reflects action research in the true sense of the word where local teachers in an English as a Foreign Language program met together repeatedly until a research study emerged. In response to this need for research on beliefs and practices regarding the teaching, learning, and assessment of speaking, nine Colombian teacher-researchers took an in-depth look at instructional practices and beliefs about oral language and its assessment. The study arose out of an awareness that in order to be more competitive on a global scale, citizens of third world countries need to be proficient in English and as a response to a

1994 mandate by the Colombian government that students be bilingual in order to procure a professional degree. Because language instruction in the past had not emphasized listening and speaking, the local teachers got together to do research on the oral component of the their EFL language classes.

The Language Center in a private university in Medellín, Colombia, set up a Research and Development Unit in order to engage in research on the practices at their center.³ Initially, a group of fifteen or so teachers enrolled in an in-service training course engaged in self-inquiry in their classrooms, and conducted an error correction project in which they examined the types of error correction that were taking place in their classrooms. Then a number of those teachers were hired to devise research projects consistent with the center's goals of internationalizing the curriculum and implementing a more communicative approach to language teaching.

One of the outcomes of their self-examination was the realization that although teachers wanted to add an oral component to their classes in an attempt to adopt a communicative style of teaching, they lacked the knowledge with which to do it. Classes consisted primarily of teacher talk. When students did communicate orally, it was generally with the teacher rather than with other students. There was very little interaction or group work. This teacher researcher unit ultimately settled on three areas of concern related to oral production in the classroom that they wished to investigate: students' and teachers' beliefs about oral production in the classroom, materials used

³ The research team was headed by the author of this article, Fass, and included nine teacher researchers: Luz Dary Aristizábal G., Marie-Claire Binder de B., Angela Campo, Fernando Crespo-Orozco, Sandra O. Gaviria, Luz Adriana Lopera O., Ana P. Muñoz, Marcela Palacio U., and Consuelo Uribe P. The second co-author, Cohen,

for providing the oral component of the class, and the measures used in oral assessment.

The research questions were as follows:

1. How do teachers and students believe oral instruction should be handled in the classroom? To what extent do the beliefs that the teachers have about students' oral production in the classroom and the students' own beliefs match the reality?
2. How are teachers using the required materials for oral language production?
3. How do teachers assess students orally?

Research Design

Sample

The sample was drawn from teachers and students involved with the Adult English Program at a private university in an upper-class neighborhood of Medellín, Colombia, the second largest city in Colombia. The teacher sample at the Adult English Program consisted of fifty-one teachers (plus the nine teacher researchers, who did not participate in the study). The vast majority of teachers were native speakers of Spanish who grew up in Spanish speaking countries or were bilingual, having lived at least part of their childhood in the U.S. These teachers came mostly from upper-class areas and the majority had spent time abroad.

Slightly fewer than half of the EFL teachers were university students who were working on their undergraduate degrees. Those with post-secondary degrees came from a wide variety of specializations. Only about a quarter of them had undergraduate

served as an external consultant to the project.

degrees in language teaching, others had undergraduate degrees in education, although not necessarily in language teaching, and the majority had no training in education at all. Those teachers with experience in language education were most familiar with the grammar-translation and audio-lingual methodologies since this was the way that they themselves had learned languages in school and was consequently the method of instruction that most of them employed in their classrooms.

The student sample consisted of 63 subjects, reflecting 5% of those enrolled in beginning, intermediate and advanced level EFL courses. Information was gathered from five different beginner classes with a total of 42 student respondents, three intermediate classes with 15 students, and two advanced classes with a total of 6 students. Courses were chosen according to the number of students enrolled in order to have the sample mirror as closely as possible the percentage of students at the high, intermediate, and low levels in the entire program. Adult courses were attended by both employees sent from large companies in the city and students from the surrounding wealthier communities.

Instrumentation

Beliefs Questionnaires, Interview, and Classroom Observation Instrument

An initial questionnaire was constructed in Spanish by the three teacher researchers in the group focusing on beliefs, referred to from here on as "the Beliefs Group." The group asked those EFL teachers who were participating in the study as respondents their beliefs about: (1) the ideal percentage of class time for teacher talk and why, (2) the ideal percentage of class time for student talk and why, (3) the

characteristics of successful oral production by students in a class, and (4) the types of oral activities appropriate for learning and practicing English in class. The questionnaire was designed so that it could be used for both teachers and students (see Beliefs/Materials Questionnaire, Appendix A).

On the basis of responses from the administration of the first questionnaire regarding types of oral activities that were appropriate, the three Beliefs Group teachers realized that they needed to know how appropriate teachers felt each type of oral activity was. As a result, they generated a list of activities based on those activities provided by teachers and students, and created a follow-up questionnaire (see Beliefs/Materials Follow-up Questionnaire, Appendix B) in which they asked their teacher colleagues to score each activity on a scale of five: from "very appropriate" to "not appropriate" for oral practice in the classroom.

In an effort to determine whether teacher and student beliefs matched the reality, a class observation instrument was also designed on the basis of responses from the first questionnaire (see Appendix D). The instrument consisted of a chart containing a list of types of oral activities based both on responses to the teacher and student questionnaires, and on the professional literature: Brown and Yule's task types (1983), Cohen's suggestions for assessing speaking skills (1994), and Wallace's (1998) observation techniques. The instrument called for identification of all oral activities, and an indication of whether they were conducted as a whole class, in pairs, or in groups, and for timing of the amount of teacher talk and student talk.

Materials Questionnaires and Interview

An initial questionnaire was designed by three teacher researchers (henceforth referred to as "the Materials Group") focusing on the materials used for teaching oral language requested that teachers indicate: (a) what they thought the strengths and weaknesses of the required textbook series were with regard to oral production activities, (b) whether they used the series' activities the way they were designed and why, (c) what kinds of changes they made to the books' oral activities and why, (d) whether the textbooks lent themselves to these changes, and (e) whether they provided additional oral activities for their classes and why (see Beliefs/Materials Questionnaire, Appendix A). The textbook series being used was the *Spectrum ESL Series Volumes 1-4* (Dye & Frankfurt, 1993-1994) and *Volume 5* (Costinett & Byrd, 1994).

As with the Beliefs Group, the Materials Group teacher researchers used responses from the first, open-ended questionnaire to construct a second one. Their goal was to obtain more information from teachers regarding the strengths and weaknesses of specific oral activities appearing in the textbooks (see Beliefs/Materials Follow-up Questionnaire, Appendix B). They created a list of nine strengths and eleven weaknesses supplied by respondents to the first questionnaire and asked teachers to indicate the extent to which they agreed with these judgments about the strengths of the activities appearing in their textbooks. Teachers were also asked to indicate the extent to which they felt that each activity actually related to oral production.

An interview was designed to focus on how the teachers carried out specific oral activities in the required textbooks in order to gather more detailed information on what

was actually happening in the classroom (see Materials Interview, Appendix C). The three teacher researchers in the Materials Group chose two representative book activities for each level so that they were able to ask teachers about the level they taught most frequently. The intention was to show the teacher the book task, ask them how they taught the exercise, and ask probing questions if responses lacked detail. The teacher-researchers were concerned with what the teachers did first, what instruction they gave students, how the students responded, the kinds of materials they used for the exercise, the time they spent on the exercise, and how they wrapped it up.

Assessment Questionnaires and Interview

The teacher researchers focusing on language assessment (henceforth "the Assessment Group") designed an initial questionnaire which asked the teachers to list the features that they considered when assessing students' oral production and to rank these features from most important to least important. Then the questionnaire provided a list of possible tasks for assessing students orally – such as describing an object or picture and performing a dialog (based on Brown & Yule, 1983), and requested the teachers to indicate for students at the beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels, the number of times per quarter they typically did each task. In addition, teachers were to indicate the extent to which feedback was given to individuals, pairs/groups, or the whole class. Within each of these categories, they were asked if the feedback was given in a written form (i.e., through a journal, a note, or an evaluation form) or orally (i.e., in conjunction with a form or on tape). Finally, the teachers were asked to indicate how often they gave students feedback on their oral production: after each oral task, once a week, three times during the term, in the middle and end of the term, at the end

of the term, or when needed (see Assessment Questionnaire, Appendix A).

In analyzing the responses to the Assessment Group's survey, the teacher researchers found that teachers in their sample had misunderstood their third question about methods of feedback on oral production. Many teachers thought that written feedback on students' oral production actually meant feedback on students' written work. Therefore, the investigators decided to clarify this and ask the question again in a follow-up questionnaire (see Assessment Follow-up Questionnaire, Appendix B). They also realized that it would be useful to know which methods of feedback were the most and least used, so in addition they asked teachers to identify the methods that they used the most and least frequently. On the question about the frequency of feedback on oral production in the initial questionnaire, many teachers had given more than one response when asked to give only one. Therefore, this question was clarified and also included in the follow-up questionnaire.

The three Assessment Group teachers focused the design of an Assessment Interview on gathering more details on how teachers assessed students orally (see Assessment Interview, Appendix C). The interview included questions on: (a) how they decided on the number of times to implement an oral assessment task, (b) how they chose which tasks to use with a particular class, (c) how feedback to students regarding their performance on an oral assessment task was given, (d) how they decided on how often to give the students feedback, and (5) what step-by-step procedure was employed when giving students feedback.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

Since pilot results had revealed that the Colombian teacher researchers had a tendency to be overly unstructured in a research design that invariably called for a structured approach to research, it was decided to devise strict procedures and scripts for all interactions with subjects (e.g., requests for participation, giving of directions, reminders to participants, and the like) in order to minimize the researcher effect.

Teacher Questionnaires and Interviews

The questionnaires for the Beliefs and Materials Groups were fairly short, so they were combined and distributed to 25 teachers. Over two-thirds of these teachers responded (68%). Interviews by the Materials Group were conducted with a random sub-sample of over half the teachers from the original group (56%) subsequent to their responding to the questionnaire and an interview was also conducted with the Adult English Program Coordinator. The Oral Assessment questionnaire was given to the other 26 teachers and 77% were returned. In addition, 42% of the teachers who received this Oral Assessment questionnaire were asked to participate in interviews.

The two teacher questionnaires (Materials/Beliefs and Oral Assessment) were distributed randomly in a mandatory teachers' meeting where the project and its benefits to the teachers were explained. Teachers were also asked to sign a consent form at this meeting. The Follow-Up Questionnaires for the Beliefs Group and the Materials Group were again combined and distributed to twenty-two of the original sample of twenty-five teachers at the Language Center. The Follow-Up Assessment Questionnaire was distributed to twenty of the twenty-six teachers who had been given the first Assessment Questionnaire. Eleven teachers responded to this follow-up

questionnaire.

Student Questionnaire

For the student Beliefs Questionnaire, the researchers visited classes to explain the project, ask students to participate, and have them sign consent forms. The students filled out the questionnaires in class, with a researcher present to answer any questions and collect the questionnaires. Again, strict procedures and scripts were adhered to in the collection of the student data and in responding to students' questions. The procedures indicated the steps to take both before and during the interview, as well as providing written instructions for the interviewer to use.

Classroom Observation

The Beliefs Group teacher researchers decided to observe six different classes for six consecutive hours each. Of the six classes observed, four were at the beginning level, one at the intermediate, and one at the advanced, reflecting the relative distribution of students across levels. Before the observations, the researchers went to the classes involved to explain what would be happening, why the class was being videotaped, and to get consent from both the students and their teacher. Procedures and scripts were written for this process as well. The reason for observing six consecutive hours was that this was the amount of time allotted for completing a unit, and researchers felt that within a unit, all types of oral activities were typically represented. In order to compare actual oral language activity in the classroom with teachers' and students' beliefs about the amount of teacher talk and student talk there should be, the group videotaped the observed classes and timed the amount of teacher and student talk.

Data Analysis Procedures⁴

Simple frequency counts for the raw data and/or percentages by category were used in the reporting of the findings because of the small sample size and unequal data entries across categories.

Results

1. How do teachers and students believe oral instruction should be handled in the classroom? To what extent do the beliefs that teachers have about students' oral production in the classroom and the students' own beliefs match the reality?

Amount of Teacher Talk and Student Talk

The Belief Group's first question concerned the amount of **teacher talk** that students and teachers felt was ideal. While the majority of both teachers and students believed teachers were to talk more than the students, students felt this even more strongly. The reasons given most frequently by teachers were: "in order to provide instruction," "to provide students with an opportunity to practice," and "to give students feedback." Students also felt that providing instruction and having an opportunity to practice were very important. However, another reason given by students was "to develop their language skills." Regarding the amount of **student talk** the teachers and students felt was ideal, most teachers and students felt that students' oral participation should be at a moderate level.

When looking only at the amount of time that involved the teacher and/or students talking (excluding the other activities), 57% comprised teacher talk and 43%

⁴We gratefully acknowledge the efforts of Dr. Marta Eugenia Alvarez Valle, a professor

student talk or group work. This was consistent with what students believed should happen in the classroom, but less than what teachers believed was appropriate. Some teachers believed that students should be talking as much as 80% of the time.

Characteristics of Good Oral Production

With regard to what teachers and students believed were the characteristics of good oral production, there were both similarities and differences in teachers' and students' responses (see Table 1). Forty-seven percent of the teachers believed that good grammar was a major aspect of good oral production, whereas only 18% of the students believed this. In contrast, 40% of the students believed fluency to be important vs. 29% of the teachers. Seventeen percent of the students believed listening comprehension to be important while only 6% of the teachers did.

In addition, there was also a disparity between the oral production goals as articulated by the Director and Academic Committee of the Language Center and the teachers' beliefs as to what constituted good oral production. While the articulated goal of the Language Center, as noted above, was to emphasize **fluency** and **meaning**, teachers tended to value **form** and **accuracy** in oral language as can be seen by their ranking "grammar" as the most important, and "vocabulary" and "pronunciation" second of the items they listed as characteristics of good oral production (see Table 1).

Beliefs about Range of Oral Activities and Classroom Observations

In comparing the results of the beliefs questionnaires with the data collected in the class observations, it was found that there was a sizeable difference between the activities that teachers listed as appropriate in the questionnaires and what was actually

of statistics from EAFIT University, in performing the statistical analyses.

observed in the classroom. Although teachers felt that a great variety of activities were appropriate for learning English, few were actually employed in the classroom; 46% of the oral activities observed were "question and answer" activities. While two-thirds of the teachers had indicated on the questionnaire that whole-class work was either "appropriate" or "very appropriate," many more than that (89%) employed this class arrangement in the oral activities that were observed. In addition, whereas ninety-five percent of teachers felt that pair work was appropriate and 100% group work, only 8% of the oral activities observed were carried out in pairs and 3% in groups. Finally, the classroom observations revealed that there was an average of three oral activities per 100-minute class, lasting for an average of 8.5 minutes. That meant that only one-quarter of the class time comprised oral activities. Hence, there was a conflict between the communicative approach that the Language Center aimed to employ and the limited role of communication as observed by means of the videotaping.

2. How are teachers using the required materials for oral language production?

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Required Textbook Series

The following five strengths of the Spectrum series emerged from the teacher questionnaire responses: (1) promotes oral language use, (2) has realistic situations in dialogs, (3) facilitates the expression of ideas, opinions, and feelings, (4) promotes communication from beginning levels, and (5) promotes oral interaction. However, it was found that teachers did not come to consensus on what the textbooks' strengths and weaknesses were.

How Teachers Used the Oral Activities in the Textbooks

Teachers indicated that they sometimes altered the way they used lessons from the textbook series in order to make oral activities more student-centered and to make the book situations more meaningful and realistic. In addition, some teachers indicated attempting to make the lessons more communicative or to give the students an opportunity to practice the language. A third of the teachers noted that adaptations were easy to make because the books' oral activities could be related to the students' lives.

3. How do teachers assess students orally?

Characteristics Considered When Assessing Students Orally

Regarding the characteristics that teachers considered when assessing students orally and the importance given to each characteristic, the top two characteristics generated by teachers were found to be *pronunciation* and *grammar*. The fact that all of these characteristics were based on accuracy runs counter to a communicative approach to teaching. One of the elements emphasized in a communicative classroom, *making oneself comprehensible*, was ranked last out of nine characteristics, along with *discourse* (see Table 2).

Tasks for Assessing Students Orally

The teachers reported using a wide variety of tasks in oral assessment of students. This was true across levels as well. In the Spectrum series (Dye & Frankfurt, 1993-1994; Costinett & Byrd, 1994), description, role-play, and dialog activities were found throughout. Activities involving the "giving of instructions" were more prevalent in

the lower-level texts, and activities involving "narration" and "giving opinions" more in the upper level texts. It would appear, therefore, that teachers tended to use the types of tasks presented in their texts, possibly meaning that the texts, rather than the teachers, were dictating the types of tasks used.

Feedback Method for Oral Production

With regard to the methods teachers employed for giving students feedback on their oral production, the results indicated that when given to individuals, pairs, or small groups, there was reported variety in whether feedback was presented orally or involved some written format, such as an evaluation sheet. However, when given to the class as a whole, the teacher most frequently reported delivering feedback orally.

Discussion and Conclusions

Summary

The Beliefs Group researchers found that while there was general agreement between student and teacher beliefs regarding the appropriate amount of student and teacher talk in the classroom, teachers believed in more robust student participation. In comparing these beliefs to actual classroom observation, there was an observed discrepancy in that teacher talk dominated the observed classes. In addition, teacher beliefs and the reality did not always match the Language Center's oral language goal, which was to "enable students to communicate orally through a communicative approach to teaching: providing student-centered courses, encouraging interaction in the classroom through pair work and group work, and presenting a variety of opportunities for students to produce spoken language."

The findings from the Materials Group indicated that the teachers in the study had differing opinions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of their textbook series, and employed a variety of methods for making the textbooks work for them. However, because the types of changes teachers were making most frequently would have needed to be made with any textbook in order to meet the needs of the specific population being taught, and because teachers felt that it was easy to make these changes, it would seem that the series was serving its purpose. On the basis of these data, therefore, the researchers concluded that the series did not need to be replaced.

Assessment Group researchers found that teachers reported focusing on pronunciation and grammatical accuracy when assessing students' oral abilities, rather than on more communicative aspects of oral production (e.g., *fluency*, *making oneself comprehensible*, and *discourse*). In addition, there was no prevalent method across teachers for giving feedback, with a preference for using the assessment tasks provided in the textbook.

Limitations

The researchers faced some limitations in drawing these conclusions. In many cases the sample size was limited. With the Beliefs Group, the large difference in teacher and student sample sizes made it difficult to compare the two groups numerically. Another limitation was that the teacher population was not fully sampled because of the difficulty of getting questionnaires back from teachers. In addition, even when questionnaires were filled out, it appeared that both teachers and students did not necessarily understand the wording of items on the pilot questionnaire and sometimes

even on the revised versions. In some ways, it was a challenge for the teachers to be doing the research in a South American city where local perspectives on what constituted research and how to conduct it were sometimes at odds with conventional approaches in the Western world, and where there was no means for compensating participants since this was an idea foreign to the local culture.

Still another limitation was that because the questionnaires were anonymous, it was not known whether the six teachers who were observed teaching had filled out the Beliefs questionnaire. Had they done so, it may have had some impact on their observed behavior (such as the amount of their teacher-talk and types of oral activities).

Suggestions for Future Research and Pedagogical Implications

It would seem important to investigate why the fit between teachers' beliefs and classroom instructional practice was not closer. It was evident from the information gathered by the Beliefs Group that both teachers and students could benefit from a better sense of what a "communicative" classroom actually entails. In addition, perhaps teachers could benefit from training in how to apply their beliefs to their classroom practice. The main pedagogical implications of the study were twofold: (1) there was a need to provide guidance both to teachers and students in how to make EFL teaching and learning truly communicative in nature, and (2) teachers needed more training in how to conduct oral language assessment in the classroom.

Conclusions

One of the strengths of this study was its efforts at convergent validation by having three different groups of teacher researchers converging on the same issue, namely oral language instruction and assessment from different vantage points. Overall, what the research on oral language production at the EAFIT University Language Center showed was that although the program claimed to have a communicative approach to teaching, the teachers had not been completely successful in implementing this approach.

Some of the data gathered, especially from the Materials Group, showed that teachers were aware of the elements of a communicative classroom and were trying to implement this approach when teaching. However, they had not applied these concepts to all areas of their classes, as was especially evident in the data gathered by the Assessment Group. Moreover, the beliefs held by teachers and by students did not generally reflect a communicative approach to second language teaching. What this meant for the Language Center was that more training of the teachers and more education of both teachers and students needed to be done in order to have a truly communicative language program.

References

- Brown, H. D. (2001). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. 2nd Ed. White Plains, NY: Longman/Pearson Education.
- Brown, J. D. (Ed.) (1998). *New ways of classroom assessment*. Alexandria, VA: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages.
- Brown, G. & Yule, G. (1983). *Teaching the spoken language: An approach based on the analysis of conversational English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Burns, A. (1999). *Collaborative action research for English language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cohen, A.D. (1994). *Assessing language ability in the classroom*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.
- Cohen, A. D. (1998). *Strategies in learning and using a second language*. Harlow, Essex: Longman.
- Costinett, D. & Byrd, D. (1994). *Spectrum 5: A communicative course in English*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Dye, J. & Frankfort, N. (1993-1994). *Spectrum 1-4: A communicative course in English*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Freeman, D. (1998). *Doing teacher-research: From inquiry to understanding*. Toronto: Heinle & Heinle.
- Hopkins, D. (1993). *A teacher's guide to classroom research*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Horwitz, E. K. (1983). *Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory*. Unpublished

- instrument. Austin, TX: The University of Texas.
- Horwitz, E. K. (1987). Surveying student beliefs about language learning. In A. Wenden, & J. Rubin (Eds.), *Learner strategies in language learning*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice/Hall International, 119-129.
- Kern, R. G. (1995). Students' and Teachers' beliefs about language learning. *Foreign Language Annals*, 28 (1), 71-92.
- Norris, J. M., Brown, J. D., Hudson, T., & Yoshioka, J. (1998). *Designing second language performance assessments*. Technical Report #18. Hawaii: Second Language Teaching & Curriculum Center, University of Hawaii at Manoa.
- Seliger, H. & Shohamy, E. (1989). *Second language research methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tumposky, N. R. (1991). Students' beliefs about language learning. *Carleton Papers in Applied Language Study*, 8, 50-65.
- Wallace, M. J. (1998). *Action research for language teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Table 1

Characteristics of Good Oral Production Listed by Teachers and Students

Characteristic⁵	Percentage of Teachers	Percentage of Students
Good grammar	47	18
Good vocabulary	29	30
Good fluency	29	40
Good pronunciation	29	46
Effective discourse	24	3
Effective communication		
of message	18	8
Staying in the foreign language	12	19
Ability to converse	12	5
Creativity	6	3
Responding appropriately to questions	6	3
Good aural comprehension	6	17

Note: Percentages total more than 100 because subjects could indicate more than one characteristic.

⁵ The characteristics are actually the investigators' characterization of teacher and student open-ended responses.

Table 2
Means and Rankings for Characteristics Teachers Consider
When Assessing Students Orally

Overall Ranking	Characteristic	Mean Teachers' Rankings (N=20)
1	Pronunciation	2.70
2	Grammar	2.05
3	Vocabulary	1.53
4	Fluency	1.47
5	Learner Strategy Variables	1.05
6	Interaction/Participation	0.92
7	Learner Style Variables	0.89
8	Aural Comprehension	0.74
9.5	Making Oneself Comprehensible	0.53
9.5	Discourse	0.53

Appendix A

Beliefs/Materials Questionnaire

The Language Center is conducting research on ways to foster oral language production in the classroom. As part of the research project, we would like your input through this questionnaire. It is made up of two sections. The first one, in English, is about the oral activities in the Spectrum Series. The second one, in Spanish, seeks information on the beliefs teachers have about oral instruction. Your responses will help us improve the quality of the teaching-learning process at the Language Center. Each section will take you no longer than 20 minutes. Put the completed questionnaire in the box labeled "Research Questionnaire #1" in the Resource Center. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

DIRECTIONS: For each question, please explain your answers in detail. If you need further information or if you have any questions, please contact Lydia Fass.

PART I: SPECTRUM SERIES

⇒ Please answer this part in English.

1. Think about the materials you have used from the Spectrum Series. What are their strengths and weaknesses in relation to providing oral production activities?

STRENGTHS of the Spectrum Series:

WEAKNESSES of the Spectrum Series:

2. Do you use the oral activities in the books the way they are designed?
Yes____ No____

Why or why not?

What kinds of changes do you make to the books' oral activities?

Why do you make these changes?

Do the textbooks lend themselves to these adaptations? Yes____ No____
Why or why not?

3. Do you provide additional oral activities for your classes? Yes____ No____
Why or why not?

PART II - TEACHERS' BELIEFS ON ORAL INSTRUCTION

⇒Esta parte de la encuesta puede responderla en ESPAÑOL.

Para responder las preguntas de esta sección, NO debe tener en cuenta las situaciones REALES de la clase, sino lo que usted crea que sería lo IDEAL. Responda con honestidad. Sus criterios son de mucha importancia para los resultados de la encuesta.

1. Teniendo en cuenta que cada clase es diferente, en su opinión, cuál sería el porcentaje (%) ideal del tiempo de clase, que debería hablar el profesor? _____ %

Por qué es apropiado este porcentaje?

2. Teniendo en cuenta que cada clase es diferente, en su opinión, cuál sería el porcentaje (%) ideal del tiempo de clase, que deberían hablar los estudiantes? _____ %

Por qué es apropiado este porcentaje?

3. Cuáles cree usted que son las características de una buena producción oral de los estudiantes en clase?

4. En su opinión, qué tipo de actividades orales son apropiadas para aprender y practicar el Inglés en clase?

Assessment Questionnaire

The Language Center is conducting research on ways to foster oral language production in the classroom. As part of the research project, we would like your input on how you assess students orally. Please take your time to respond to this survey as the information you give us will help us improve the assessment process at the Language Center. The survey will take you approximately 20 minutes. When answering the questions think not only of the courses you are teaching now, but also about the courses you have taught in the past. If you have any questions, see Lydia Fass. Put the completed questionnaire in the box labeled "Research Questionnaire #2" in the Resource Center. Thank you very much for your help.

1. Characteristics or features to be considered when assessing students orally

- A. In order to help you think of the features of oral assessment, think about a specific class of yours. Which students would you consider to be the best orally? Why? What characteristics of their oral production affect that assessment?
- B. In the left hand column list the characteristics or features of their oral production that you would use to rank their oral abilities.
- C. In the right hand column **rank** these characteristics from most important (1) to least important.

CHARACTERISTICS OR FEATURES TO BE CONSIDERED WHEN ASSESSING STUDENTS ORALLY	RANKING
Comments:	

2. Tasks for assessing students orally

Here is a list of oral assessment tasks for beginner (levels 0-5), intermediate (levels 6-10) and advance courses. For each task specify the level in which you have used it. Also, write the **NUMBER OF TIMES** (not percentage) you have used it per level per quarter. Please write answers for both courses you are teaching now, and ones you have taught in the past.

TASKS Students do	LEVEL(S)	Number of times per level per quarter
The student describes an object or picture	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
The student instructs someone to draw something	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
The student instructs someone how to use a piece of equipment	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
The student describes/instructs how a number of objects are to be arranged	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
The student gives route directions	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____

The student tells a story	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
The student gives an eye-witness account	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
The student expresses an opinion or idea on a specific topic	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
The student justifies why he/she chooses to do something in a certain way.	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
The student describes a personal experience	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
The student role plays	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
The student performs a dialogue	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
Other (please specify):	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
Comments:		

3. Feedback method for oral production

The following are ways in which teachers can give students feedback. In the right hand column put a check (✓) next to each of the methods you use to give students feedback on their oral production.

PEOPLE RECEIVING FEEDBACK	ORAL / WRITTEN	FORM OF FEEDBACK	Check (✓) here for the one(s) you use
INDIVIDUAL	ORAL	with form without form taped other (specify): _____	_____ _____ _____ _____
	WRITTEN	with form through journal as a note other (specify): _____	_____ _____ _____ _____

PAIR/GROUP	ORAL	with form without form taped other (specify): _____	_____ _____ _____ _____
	WRITTEN	with form through journal as a note other (specify): _____	_____ _____ _____ _____
WHOLE CLASS	ORAL	with form without form taped other (specify): _____	_____ _____ _____ _____
	WRITTEN	with form through journal as a note other (specify): _____	_____ _____ _____ _____

COMMENTS:

4. **Frequency of feedback on oral production**

Think about how frequently you give students feedback on their oral production in the classes you teach. For each level, check the frequency with which you give students feedback on their oral production. 'Beginner' refers to levels 0-5; 'intermediate' to levels 6-10.

FREQUENCY	LEVEL(S)	PUT A CHECK WHERE APPROPRIATE
After each oral task	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
Once a week	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
In the middle and at the end of every cycle	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
At the end of every cycle	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____

Three times during the cycle	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
When needed	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
Other (s) specify:	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
COMMENTS:		

Appendix B

Beliefs/Materials Follow-up Questionnaire

SURVEY FOR THE EAFIT LANGUAGE CENTER RESEARCH PROJECT

As you already know there are a number of tools that the research team is using to collect data. The first was the questionnaire for teachers. The questionnaires provided us with general information. The second phase of data collection involved interviewing teachers for more detailed information and observing classes.

From the information teachers gave us in the interviews, we created a list of strengths and weaknesses concerning the Spectrum Series.

PART I

We would like you to look at the list and mark whether you completely agree, somewhat agree, or do not agree at all that the item is a strength or weakness. For each item, please put a check in the appropriate column.

STRENGTHS	Completely Agree	Somewhat Agree	Do Not Agree at All
1. Promotes oral language use			
2. Clearly explains features of dialogues			
3. Has realistic situations in dialogues			
4. Has language appropriate for all levels of formality			
5. Facilitates the expression of ideas, opinions and feelings through activities			
6. Sequences speaking tasks logically (structured to unstructured)			
7. Promotes communication from beginning levels			
8. Promotes oral interaction			
9. Provides authentic situations			

WEAKNESSES	Completely Agree	Somewhat Agree	Do Not Agree at All
1. Contains mechanical practice			
2. Is boring			
3. Is repetitive			
4. Doesn't contain authentic situations			
5. Is written for English as a second language (ESL), not English as a foreign language (EFL)			
6. Lacks learning strategies focus			
7. Doesn't contain enough explanation concerning structures			
8. Contains repetitive structure exercises			
9. Has too many structure exercises per unit			
10. Has too few activities			
11. Has too many topics			

PART II

Now please go back to each list (strengths and weaknesses) and put a star to the left of the items you think are related to ORAL PRODUCTION.

Part III

The following is a list of oral activities that you told us were appropriate for learning and practicing English orally in class. For each item in the list, please mark how appropriate you think the activity is for oral practice in the classroom.

	Very Appropriate	Appropriate	Somewhat Appropriate	Not Very Appropriate	Not Appropriate
Activity					
Roleplay					
Question and answer					
Repetition					
Games					
Pair work					
Group work					
Whole class activities					

Reporting					
Description					
Telling a story					
Giving instructions					
Discussion					
Debate (formally arguing pros and cons of an issue)					
Presentations					
Interviews					
Practicing dialogues					
Oral reading					
Problem solving					
Giving/defending opinions					
Songs					
Substitution activities (drills)					
Summarizing					
Retelling					

Assessment Follow-up Questionnaire

May 13, 1999

Dear Teachers,

We really appreciate your having answered the research questionnaire. We found that in order to make the best use of the information you gave us, we need to ask you a few more questions.

PART I

On question number 3, we would like to clarify what we meant by oral and written feedback on students' oral production. An example of oral feedback would be sitting down with your students and discussing their oral performance. An example of written feedback would be giving your students a note or an evaluation form that tells them how they did during a **speaking** activity. In the third column, "with form" means using an evaluation form. If this is not how you answered question number 3, please go back to the original question (attached - page 3) and make any necessary changes to your answers. It is okay to erase or cross out the old answers if they are incorrect.

PART II

Additionally, we would like to get some more information from you on how you give

feedback. On the same chart for question number 3, in the last column where you put the checks, put a (+) next to the manner of feedback you use the most and a (-) next to the manner of frequency you use the least.

PART III

On question number 4, many teachers gave multiple answers but we are looking for only one answer per level. We have attached a new copy of this question (page 2). Please take a look at the new directions and answer this question again.

Thank you again.

4. Frequency of feedback on oral production

- A. Think about how frequently you give systematic feedback to every student in your class; for example, going through categories on an evaluation form with them. For each level, check how frequently you give students feedback. Check only ONE answer per level.

FREQUENCY	LEVEL(S)	PUT A CHECK WHERE APPROPRIATE
After each oral task	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
Once a week	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
Three times during the cycle	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
In the middle and at the end of every cycle	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
At the end of the cycle	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
Other (s) specify:	beginner intermediate advanced	_____ _____ _____
COMMENTS:		

- B. If you give additional feedback when needed, check here: ____.

Appendix C

Materials Group Interview

Introduction:

This interview is part of the Research Project on materials being done at the Language Center at Eafit. It is the next step after having answered the questionnaire on the Spectrum Series. It will take about 30 minutes to complete this interview. Please, explain your answers in detail. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Interview Question:

How do you teach this exercise? (refer to a specific exercise from the book)

SUB-QUESTIONS:

- What do you do first?
- What instructions do you give your students?
- What do you do as a teacher?
- What do the students do?
- What kind of material do you use for this exercise?
- How much time do you spend on this exercise?
- How do you wrap-up this exercise?

Assessment Group Interview

1. How do you decide on the number of times you implement an oral assessment task with a class? (refer to chart for question 2 of questionnaire)
2. How do you choose which tasks to use with a particular class?
3. How do you give your students feedback on their oral production? (refer to question 3 of questionnaire)
4. How do you decide how often to give students feedback on their oral production? (refer to question 4 of questionnaire)
5. Can you describe the procedure you use to give your students feedback? (ask for each manner given in answer to question 3)

Appendix D: Observation Tool

ORAL ACTIVITY	FREQUENCY			TOTAL
	CLASS WORK	PAIR WORK	SMALL GROUP	
Describing (person, object, place, process, event, etc.)				
Debating (arguing two sides of an issue)				
Dramatizing (with given or created script – formal presentation.)				
Expressing an opinion or idea (as the focus of the activity.)				
Games (purpose of fun or competition.)				
Justifying something (defending a decision or action.)				
Oral reading				
Practicing a given dialog				
Presentations & speeches (improvised or rehearsed – conveying info.)				
Question & answer				
Repeating (after tape or Teacher.)				
Reporting (giving an account of something seen, read, done or heard.)				
Role-playing (with no script)				
Songs				
Story telling				
Student giving instructions (as the focus of the activity.)				
Others (specify)				

OBSERVER'S COMMENTS:

